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The Transformation of Antonio Gramsci: A Study in Retrieval

Oscar Pemantle

Abstract

This paper is to present the essential ideas of Antonio Gramsci about active or creative learning. When contemplating Gramsci's views "On Education" an intriguing puzzle confronts the educator. In the literature on the topic Gramsci emerges as the hero with two faces, two heads facing in precisely opposite directions. Of the partisans commanding the two thought worlds, four can be singled out for mention here: Quentin Hoare, Henry Giroux, Paulo Friere, and E.D. Hirsch. Many of major scholars have misunderstood Gramsci because they seem to be biased from their own cultural backgrounds. The solution is quite simple. It is a question of *techné*, not of ideology. It follows that teaching of this form is always value neutral. It cannot have any purely ideological axe to grind for that is the very nature of a *techné*.

■ **Key words** : Antonio Gramsci, education, traditionalist, progressivist, active school, creative school, culture

The Problem

When contemplating Gramsci's views "On Education" an intriguing puzzle confronts the educator. In the literature on the topic Gramsci emerges as the hero with two faces, two heads facing in precisely opposite directions.

The views of Antonio Gramsci on education present a problem to the scholar, the educator, the teacher, and the enlightened citizen concerned about the fate of education as a casualty in the war on culture. His views have been subject to extensive analysis by partisans on both

sides for over a generation. They involve writers of prominence, men who would all appear to know what they are talking about. Yet, the essential Gramsci seems to slip through their fingers. To the Left, he emerges as the incarnation of the educator as radical and visionary. While to the Right, he takes shape as the beau ideal of traditional and conservative education. Each case is forcefully argued and, at its best, displays wide familiarity with his writing and the literature surrounding it.

Disputes of this kind are not unknown in political science. In a celebrated article Sir Isaiah Berlin (1971) summarizes the centuries old “question of Machiavelli.” And in the introduction to what is the most precise and imaginative translation of *The Social Contract*, Willmore Kendall tells us that the interpretation of Rousseau’s masterpiece has, despite “its engaging sentence-by-sentence simplicity,” become a tangle of conflicting opinions. But, *The Prince* (1532) has long signaled its problematic character by the sudden change in the last chapter. And Rousseau’s great work is pitched on a hair-raising level of abstraction and complexity. By contrast, Gramsci’s essay, his most explicit theoretical statement, is a mere seventeen pages in length. It is as plain to see as the nose on your face and as easy to read as the Sunday paper. Why then the mystery and why the controversy? What is the problem?

The War of Ideas

Of the partisans commanding the two thought worlds, four can be singled out for mention here. On the radical side, the first in the field is Quentin Hoare, the English translator of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971) with its generous and well-informed introduction. This was followed some years later by Henry Giroux, a prominent disciple of Paulo Friere.

Equally notable are the captains of culture on the other side. Pride of place here belongs to Harold Entwistle, a British educator now domiciled in Canada, whose book *Antonio Gramsci, Conservative Schooling*

for Radical Politics (1979) broke new ground. He was then followed by E. D. Hirsch, formerly a professor of literature whose *Cultural Literacy* (1987) had already made him a household word, to be followed by *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (1996). Hirsch, who is also fluent in Italian, built on the work of Entwistle to make the case for Gramsci as a traditional educator. Both Entwistle and Hirsch were then duly savaged by Giroux in the once selective pages of the *Harvard Educational Review*, *Telos*, and *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. The fires in the culture war were blazing brightly.

The core of Hoare's argument is the contention that everything Gramsci says on education "must" be read in light of his revolutionary perspective as a Marxist; Gramsci's language and heresies in a more "conservative" direction were simply strategies to evade the censor. But why "must" Gramsci's thoughts "On Education" all be read in this light? Hoare offers no justification for his canon of interpretation. He simply presents it as a self-evident truth, as Higher Dogma. Gramsci might well have used certain circumlocutions to evade the censor's eye. The stock examples here are the use of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin's real names and the phrase "the philosophy of praxis" to stand for "Marxism." Yet only a few essays later he refers quite openly to Proudhon and his famous book on poverty and also to "some Marxists" and so forth (Gramsci, 1971, p.109). Giroux has written more extensively, favoring us with three long articles and part of a book. He is a convert from Freire to Gramsci, blending them both into his own special cocktail, now made in America. Giroux's arguments are made in a blaze of passion. To a cool critic, however, they are singularly unconvincing.

Consider only a couple or so of his main arguments. Giroux makes much of Gramsci's theory of the intellectual. Much of this, such as his view that all men are "intellectuals" because they all perform some intellectual labor, is idiosyncratic and borders on the absurd. To group the local lens grinder in a class with Spinoza (or Leibniz, or Newton, not to mention Galileo) is to make nonsense of a category whose very purpose is to distinguish. More important is the category of the

“transformative” intellectual with its suggestively Leninist overtones. To the extent that we simply mean leadership of a genuinely transforming power, as in Kuhn’s paradigm transforming individuals, or Jaspers’ paradigmatic leaders of the axial age, the Galileos and Newtons, the Bachs and Beethovens and Mozarts, the Adam Smiths and Ricardos, the Darwins, Marxes and Keynes, the Einsteins of today and tomorrow have all so far been the products of traditional culture and education. The socialist world has produced nothing to match it nor has the praxis and “the philosophy of praxis” in Gramsci, Freire, and Giroux. In fact, socialism has everywhere and at all times meant the destruction of reason and the degradation of culture.¹⁾

Giroux likes to think that he is “thinking like Gramsci” but this is pure illusion. Without any real competence in political theory or philosophy, Gramsci’s critique of the superstructure, and hence his unique brand of Marxism, is seen through the lens of vulgar Marxism prevalent among American pseudo-intellectuals. So it comes as no surprise when he exhibits no understanding of Gramsci’s thoughts “On Education.” These are, however, only his most minor blemishes. In his attack on Entwistle he strikes his most characteristic pose, compounding ersatz moral indignation with bogus scholarship. Entwistle’s paradoxical thesis is open to question, but this is not the way to answer it.

Giroux opens his attack on a note of lofty dismissal. He adopts the same strategy when criticizing Allen Bloom, of whose philosophy he displays no shred of comprehension, and E. D. Hirsch, whom he ranks among the “ideologues,” Giroux’s favorite term for “conservatives.” The attack on Entwistle exceeds either or both of these in hostility and abuse. To reprint these passages is distasteful. Any interested reader can easily find them in their unlovely originals. Among a plethora of references to the secondary literature (in English) there are only three to Gramsci himself and *The Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935). In a passage on the skills training side of primary and secondary education, the core of the curriculum, Giroux assures us of “an array of skills” to be found in the program of instruction. To a reader of Gramsci, this is a remarkable claim.

Remarkable it may be, but is it true? Giroux furnishes no documentation. When asked point blank for the necessary documentation, Giroux is airiness itself. "It is," he assures us again, "somewhere in the Notebooks." Perhaps so, but one wonders precisely where, since no one that I know has ever noticed it. In another passage, he castigates Entwistle for likening the status of knowledge in Gramsci to the "positivism" of Karl Popper in his theory of "objective knowledge" or "epistemology without a subject." In fairness, Giroux has something of a point here, though it might not be exactly the one he thinks.

For one thing, Entwistle is quite aware of his hero's Marxism. For another, we have it on Popper's own authority that, far from being a positivist, he was not admitted to the meetings of the Vienna Circle precisely because of his well-known opposition to logical positivism (Popper, 1975, p. 45). Such blunders would make a schoolboy blush! To castigate Entwistle, a traditional educator, for the broad similarity he sees between the traditionalist position he imputes to Gramsci and the right-wing views of E. D. Hirsch and Diane Ravitsch, Chester Finn, and Charles Sykes, represents yet another form of confusion. Entwistle is not making a political alliance or even a political point. His political views, as far as I know them, are those of a British labourite or, at most, a lib-labber as they were called.

The point is that traditional education, as a form of education and teaching, is an abstract form, which can readily accommodate an extended family of opinions from the social democracy of Entwistle to the Olin scholar Sykes, and do it with no inconvenience. Giroux may have fumbled at every turn, but the question still remains. Has Entwistle made the case that Gramsci was, despite all appearances (and preconceptions) a traditional educator? Or has he pulled a rabbit out of his British hat? This is the decisive question to which we now turn.

The Hat and the Rabbit

Entwistle's hat was made in England in the mid to late fifties. It

is not the elegant chapeau made in France at the *École normale supérieure*. Entwistle is not a Nomalien. His hat is strictly British made and manufactured in the School of Education in London. The original framework was designed by a foreigner, an Austrian engineer now turned to philosophy, named Ludwig Wittgenstein. However, the immediate craftsmen were all British. Entwistle and his outlook are as sturdily British as John Bull and fish and chips. He has all the British virtues. He is patient, hardworking, indefatigable, knowledgeable, well informed, and full of common sense... and dead wrong. Are you surprised, dear reader? Then let me unsurprised you by sketching the profile of a British School of Ed man, in the case of Harold Entwistle vis-à-vis Antonio Gramsci. Here it is in a few steps from its plausible beginning to its paradoxical end. The fault lies not in Entwistle but in the lens provided by the School of which he is a most outstanding member. First, consider the vocabulary, the terminology through which he sees things, and which he, therefore, applies to Gramsci. There are terms like the elegant “cognitive repertoire” and the less elegant “cognitive baggage.” Applied to Gramsci, these mid and late twentieth century Anglicisms are decidedly anachronistic.

Our second question is inevitably: Where did Entwistle develop the arcane repertoire? Where did he pick up this terminological baggage? The answer is: he was indoctrinated in it by his teachers in the School of Education. British philosophy was completing the transition from Russell to Wittgenstein, and from the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* (1922) to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and later the *Blue and Brown Books* (1933, 1935). The logical positivism of the Ayer-Russell persuasion had given way to Oxford Philosophy, or analytic philosophy, or language philosophy. “Philosophy” Wittgenstein once remarked, “is the effort to keep ourselves from being hexed by language.”

The names which brighten Entwistle’s discourse are those of Gilbert Ryle, Karl Popper, R. S. Peters, and Israel Sheffler, their most notable American counterpart. The outstanding feature of this British philosophy, like its American counterpart in the earlier philosophy of James, is the fact that it is “doing” philosophy without a subject. The psychological

subject has disappeared.²⁾ When it is “doing” moral philosophy, it is in the language of morals and ethics in which it is most interested.³⁾ And when it is “doing” epistemology, it is “doing” epistemology without a subject. This is most evident in the behaviorism of Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* (1949). The subject-act-object philosophy down to Brentano and so much a part of Catholic philosophy has long been jettisoned as outdated, and so the subject-object dialectic of Hegelian and Marxist fame.⁴⁾ Yet, this was the tradition into which the young Gramsci was born and raised and whose great names are the early Croce and Labriola. And this is why any attempt to see him through the lens provided by linguistic behaviorism, language philosophy, and the philosophy of science, Gilbert Ryle and R. S. Peters as well as their lesser lights is inevitably an anachronism.

Third, in reading the text Entwistle makes a crucial mistake in method. He does not attempt to understand Gramsci precisely as Gramsci understood himself. Instead he sees him, i.e., interprets him, through a haze of secondary literature. Simply said, when Entwistle looks at his hero he sees him through alien eyes. Once it is understood that Gramsci proceeds in terms of a theory of the subject, Entwistle’s error is clearly seen. In focusing all attention on the object pole, on the category of content and purely content-related criteria which formed this universe, Entwistle has made a “category mistake” and given the discussion a twist in the direction of continued confusion, conformism, and sterility. The dimensions of this confusion will emerge more clearly in the critique of E. D. Hirsch, the second half of the Entwistle-Hirsch axis.

Entwistle has covered the field, not only in English but also in Italian. His vacuum cleaner takes it all in, biographies, commentaries favorable and otherwise, etc., etc. He pores over everything Gramsci has written, *The Cuaderni*, *The Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935), the *Scritti Giovanile*, the letters to his wife about his young child, everything...and everything given about equal weight. But this is not how Gramsci wrote or wished to be read. In fact, as Entwistle well knows, he warned against it. He outlined his theory on education in its ideal form in an essay,

and it is that essay which should occupy center stage and be given the spotlight. Read closely with due thought it gives us a picture as far different from the behaviorist outlook and language philosophy as the real Gramsci, the Gramsci of “On Education” is from the traditional or “routine minded pedagogue” (as Dezamy called him in the first socialist critique of traditional education).

Let us evaluate the traditionalist case as made by Entwistle. To wit: Entwistle points out three capital features of traditional education, all of which he insists are conspicuously featured in Gramsci. The three features are: 1) the traditional curriculum, 2) competitive testing, and 3) discipline, backed by homework and hard work aplenty. None of this demonstrates his case. Consider the first. Entwistle repeatedly refers to “curriculum” in Gramsci. But, unless my eyes deceive me, there is no “curriculum” to be found in these pages. Can Entwistle tell us precisely what the Gramsci curriculum in say, literature, or say, history is in fact?

Of course not. Entwistle has confused a “curricular domain” with a curriculum properly speaking. Certainly Gramsci would favor the traditional curriculum in mathematics or science and also something like it in history and literature. But so would other critics of traditional education, such as advocates of Socratic or discovery teaching. This is not at all the dull, monotonous “chalk-and-talk” characteristic of traditional education. Also the chalk-and-talk cognoscenti are always and everywhere wedded to the textbook with its prefabricated catalog of contents. We range far beyond that, and right away. Which of the two makes for better, i.e., more engaging and professionally skillful mathematics teaching and learning?

And now ask yourself which of the two models is closer to the whole form and spirit of the creative school? The same can be said about testing which you can see in the form of three stiff mathematics competitions presented, in brief on three DVDs available on our website (www.instituteforactivelearning.org). In the context of discovery teaching or the “creative school,” as Gramsci calls it, the entire psychological content of testing and test taking is reversed from fear learning to pleasure

learning. See it for yourself in the expression of the students' reactions and those of their teachers.

Once these points are grasped, Entwistle's mistake regarding the meaning of "discipline" in Gramsci is easy to see. He has simply read his own experience into the completely different structure and horizon of Gramsci "On the Creative School," which is as different from the traditional school as cheese is from chalk.

Since I am also speaking to an audience of Latin culture, let me cite the reflections of the most outstanding critic to write in the language of Cervantes. Read the relevant passages in Ortega's *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932). Read them, ponder them, steep yourself in them, make them your own, then see how well they fit in their realism with the high aspirations articulated in "The Creative School" and how little they square with the traditional school in Spain and Italy, Europe and America, yesterday and today. The tension between Gramsci and Entwistle, of the creative school and the traditional school, emerges most clearly in their relationship to mass society and culture. In its aim and orientation, the creative school, with its rigors of discipline, tests, and sustained hard work, with its orientation toward the "select minority" (the pungent phrase is Ortega's own), stands in tension with the insistent pressures towards standardization, leveling, and deculturation. The traditional school is part and parcel of the institutional order of mass society and its culture. Nowhere is this better seen than in the vulgarization of the prepackaged textbooks, now said to be "produced" rather than written, and the indoctrination provided by the drone of the lecture. In the traditional school we witnessed the substitution of bad training for good education. Its diploma has come to be valued as a key to entry-level jobs or as a passport to a mass university or community college. Whatever its rhetoric, its actual aims are crudely utilitarian. It has nothing to do with Education understood as the culture of the mind and the formation of character and personality. Under these insistent pressures, Voegelin has written, the idea of Culture is practically dead.⁵⁾

The Model: I. The Creative School

Gramsci's contribution to the theory of Education stands or falls with his profile of "the creative school." It is the locus classicus of his thought and should be considered carefully by everyone, friend or foe, wishing to express an informed opinion. Yet, it is precisely this essay which has been slurred over by the iconic critics and commentators, left and right, mentioned above. Every phrase and line in it should be carefully noted and assessed for its true and proper meaning in the context of the essay as a whole. Any careful analysis will at once reveal that it is not another essay in the vein of radical ideology and journalism. It is not a partisan political polemic in simple juxtaposition to the Gentile reform. Nor is it the old traditional school now given a new label and dressed up for British or Canadian or American consumption. Quite the contrary, in these few pages Gramsci has presented a model of the ideal or best type of school, the "idea" of a school, its aim, structure, and functioning.

But first a word about the nature of a model. Simply put, a model is a mental picture of the entity or system which the model builder wishes us to see in its essential nature or structure. So, Marx gave us a model of capitalism, and Hilferding of finance capital. So again Macpherson gives us a model of Hobbesian society and society as it came to be conceived by Locke. A model, by its very nature, is an analytical or technical construction. In the large, it can be either correct or incorrect, right or wrong as an instrument of science, not of ideology. It can be useful no matter what one's political orientation. It is *a value neutral* construction. That is why their critics can still read Marx or Macpherson with profit and pleasure, and this is how Gramsci on "The Creative School" deserves to be read.

The creative school presents a model with three moving parts: 1) the nature of the student, 2) the role of the teacher, and 3) the method by which the model is to function. The traditional school can likewise

be understood as a model with three moving parts: 1) the knowing teacher, 2) the unknowing student or class, and 3) the authoritative or canonical textbook. Clearly, the polar opposition between the two models undermines the fundamental axiom at the heart of the Entwistle-Hirsch thesis.

Every school has an aim, a fundamental purpose and direction which give it its identity. The aim of the creative school is to produce those great scholars who are necessary to every civilization. Yet, Gramsci is not swept away by the flush of the romantic. His analysis is cold sober and reveals no trace of Trotsky's intoxicated "Every man an Aristotle, a Goethe, a Marx." Quite the reverse, this will be the fortune of the select few, those happy few who can find leisure and energy and diligence to develop it. To become a real craftsman, or better yet, an artist, required hard work and plenty of it, but schools alone cannot produce this. Unless he was a fool, Gramsci realized that the creative school must rest on and be the expression of a culture which really values the great in art and science, that turns its eyes upward to the true, the beautiful, and the good. The creative school is in radical tension with mass culture.

The traditional school, with its cult of skills, is fundamentally utilitarian and devoid of soul. The creative school, as a social enterprise, has a moral basis and is charged with moral energy.

The student in the creative school is the polar opposite from the student in the traditional school, docile and tractable, duly taking notes from his books and lectures, and dishing up received opinions on his exams. In the creative school the student is, above all, a discoverer of "new truths," (Gramsci, 1971, p. 33)⁶ even if these new truths are old truths. They are new to the student, for *he* has discovered them. To the traditionalist who would say that this is simply reinventing the wheel Gramsci would answer, "You, Signor, are focusing on the wheel and not on the process of invention." What, then, is the teacher's role in this "process of invention," or "discovery"? The teacher is to act as "the friendly guide" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 33). There it is, the lightest touch and nothing more. What exactly does he mean? To understand Gramsci on this critical point, to grasp the range of its implications, it is necessary

to circle in, to take the *via negativa*.

Let us begin by asking what a “friendly guide” is not. One thing he is not is the “routine minded pedagogue,” the typically heavy-handed lecturer of “chalk-and-talk” fame. The lecturer and his lecture are incompatible with the role of the “friendly guide.” The teacher here interprets the texts for the student. He tells you the right view of Marx, or of socialism, or of fascism, or of democracy, etc. He does not guide you with his critical questions to discover the truth, your truth for the moment, which can yield to a newer and better or higher truth. With the formidable figure of the lecturer (or traditional teacher) confronting you, you discover nothing for yourself.

Yet it is equally at odds with the teacher or facilitator as eunuch, as in progressive education. When the eunuch speaks, the first thing he will say is that he is a man. What he facilitates is the student’s way down the sawdust trail to salvation. The progressivist facilitator, the teacher as “transformative intellectual” is an ideologue masquerading as educator. Of all this there is not a trace in Gramsci “On Education.” Yet it would be a mistake to assume that there is no relationship between “the active school” and “the creative school” or that such a relationship is merely one of juxtaposition or opposition. It is not. Gramsci is clear on this point. “The creative school is the culmination of the active school” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 33). Why so?

For all its faults, in the theory of the active school deriving from Rousseau,⁷⁾ as handed down by Hegel and Gentile, the student was considered as subject and not as the object of instruction in the malleable world of objects which the traditionalist sees. Where the traditionalist stresses instruction almost exclusively, the Rousseau-Gentile-romantic school stresses “education” and educativity, however flawed its conception and execution in fascist hands.⁸⁾ And education, the imparting of culture, comes into play when the student is treated as subject. For culture is the world of the subject, not the object. Whatever else it has, a collection of refrigerators has no culture. It produces no music and creates no art. It has no religion because it has no soul.

The Model: II. The Search for a Method

The conception of method is left implicit in Gramsci. He was not a pedagogue or teacher with experience in teaching the core subjects in primary/secondary education. However, we can find the essentials of the method by fixing attention on the cardinal features of the creative school and asking the question: What is the method with which we realize the aim of the school? The first clue is that here the student is a discoverer. Learning for him is the discovery of “new truths” even if these be “old truths” for the teacher and for us. What then, is it to discover a truth that is new for you? The answer, quite obviously, is: it is to have insight into what was originally obscure, puzzling, or confusing. “Discovery,” or real learning, is in its essence insight learning. The teacher’s task is to promote the conditions which make for insight into the problem at hand. Insights, if they are real, do not, of course, come a dime a dozen. But they are more frequent than has been believed, especially when the ground for them has been prepared.

The preparation is the supreme art and craft of teaching. The discovery, like the fine seducer, is never in a hurry. Hurrying to get there, to cover a preordained content, is fatal. Initially, the teacher must hold his fire and let the flow of insight come from the class. Of course, the insights or some of them might be mistaken. Here is where the stream of critical questioning, the critical fire which the teacher has held back, can come into play. This is critical cross-examination or “eristic,” the quality which has given this form of teaching the name “Socratic teaching.” The name is not a misnomer. All Socratic teaching is teaching conducted behind the veil of Socratic ignorance, the famous Socratic incognito. Once the student knows, or thinks he knows, the teacher’s opinion, the process of discovery is short-circuited. The student has become the object of instruction, not the subject in the process of discovery. It is the most superficial of mistakes to think that Socratic or discovery teaching is against instruction, per se. It all depends on what you mean

by “instruction.” If you mean “instruction” as the creation of koranic mind, as a higher order variant of algorithmic or formula thinking, or indoctrination, or mental conditioning, then it is. But if you have a more elevated conception, one wide enough to include the classic model, now modernized and brought up to date, and applied to the teaching of the core subjects (with due adaptation) then of course it is not. (Again, I invite you to view our website: www.instituteforactivelearning.org).

Clearly, this is the form of teaching in which the teacher functions as “friendly guide.” The two terms have exactly equal weight: too “friendly” and he melts into the facilitator of the romantic school and present day progressivism, too much the directing “guide” and he becomes the “chalk-and-talk” lecturer for whom the sonority of his words drowns out all creative energy in the student and the class. “Education” wrote Paolo Freire in his most notable line, “is suffering from narration sickness.” The Socratic teacher never tells the student anything. The art of Socratic teaching is to elicit everything from the student. Here let me say that in all respects but this one, the discovery school I established in Berkeley and the creative school in the pages of Gramsci are virtually identical, this proving that Gramsci was no utopian. It can be done in the here and now and reach standards beyond the dreams of the routine minded pedagogue.

The exception, the difference between the creative school and my discovery school is this: Gramsci comes to the table as a high-minded, convinced, and dedicated socialist. He comes as a convinced Marxist, while I come to the table from the Socratic side. From the philosophic point of view, here called Socratic, all questions are open questions since the criterion of truth is held in suspension during all conversations at “the philosopher’s roundtable.” Any conclusion the student comes to is his own pro tempore and open to correction only by him.

Gramsci opens by grounding the process, at least in the first phase, in “dynamic conformism” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 33). So, too, for Gramsci, I believe, the Enlightenment opened a new chapter and its truths are taken as the framework of “a new humanism.” Accordingly, the creative

school has an ultimate telos, an ultimate value orientation which it is to bring to fruition over time.⁹⁾ My question to Gramsci, the Socratic question par excellence, is this: Would a school with such an ultimate telos, such a built-in orthodoxy, produce the Antonio Gramscis of tomorrow? The Einstein of only yesterday, (1905) whom we may take as a model, was an academic heretic.¹⁰⁾

The Model: III. The Missing Link

Why have our previous commentators gone so terribly awry? Why have they failed to see the missing step even when the threads of the argument were in their hands? The answer is a) that they have not learned to read the text correctly, i.e., with an innocent eye and b) they have simply been looking in the wrong places: one to Gramsci's political ideology, the other to his diverse and scattered writings, and that in the context of a traditionalist schooling and paraphernalia. To understand Gramsci as he understood himself in this essay we need to supply the missing step in the move from theory to practice.

To a Latin audience it is most appropriate to begin with the name of Don Miguel de Unamuno, the most distinguished philosopher and poet to write in the language of Calderon. What a difference there is here, from the vulgar political ideology of Giroux and the dry and didactic prose of Entwistle! Don Miguel's work, *El Sentimiento Trajico de la Vida* (I refer to the English translation which is accompanied by an illuminating introduction by Salvador de Madariaga) has a place of distinction on my shelf of books. Right there in the opening pages, indeed in the very first lines, Don Miguel introduces us to the philosopher "as a man of flesh and bones." There we have it in the robust language of the Basque who became a professor of philosophy at Salamanca. Unamuno and Bergson are at the fountainhead of the Catholic and Mediterranean tradition into which Gramsci was born. Here we have no rigid dichotomy between mind and matter, body and soul, thought and feeling, or subject

and object. Instead we begin with a fundamental unity. Socrates called it the soul.

Today we might call it “intelligent subjectivity.” It is this locus of “intelligent subjectivity” toward which the teacher “as friendly guide” directs all his attention, be it in the creative school as model or in the discovery school as reality. The Catholic tradition is one great source in developing the theory of the subject. The other was the Hegelian and Marxist tradition coming down to Gramsci by Croce and Labriola. Most outstanding in this tradition was the brilliant work of the early Lukacs.¹¹⁾

In the field of education, the situation was dramatically different. Here the names to conjure with were those of the early Russell, Whitehead, and Dewey. I invite the reader to look at Russell’s writings of the time, in particular *The Study of Mathematics* and “The Functions of the Teacher.” Notice the pronounced emphasis on the awakening and development of consciousness in the child, on the importance of curiosity and a sense of wonder, on figuring things out for himself and not taking old Mr. Chips’ word for it, of developing an unbiased attitude and retaining a sense of healthy skepticism in the face of the authority of the teacher and the textbook and so forth. These are all subject values and, as they are created, ideas lose their inertness and come alive. Now the vibrancy has flown into the classroom, and with it the pleasures of discovery and the ecstasy of the eureka experience. An even more striking demarche was made by Dewey in *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902). In this little book Dewey reintroduced the dimension of experience and feeling into all learning worthy of the name. This makes him the founding father of all modern discovery teaching later developed by the National Science Foundation and its teams of scholars beginning with Jerome S. Bruner.

Russell’s essays have been widely available in Britain and in the United States. So too, is the case with Whitehead, and certainly Dewey. Their names appear in every respectable reading list in the seminars at the schools of education. They supply all the threads of a solution which the cognoscenti have failed to provide.

Instead, one faction simply repeats the same old formula whose elements are all too familiar: 1) We need standards, higher standards; 2) We need a longer school day and school year; 3) We need more rigor, better texts, and more and better science equipment and, of course, computers; 4) We need more tests and more rigorous testing and, perhaps, higher salaries for the teachers and better facilities for the students. The progressivist critique is equally familiar, and equally irrelevant. Into this stalemate is plunged the figure of Antonio Gramsci, who would have had as little to do with the one as with the other. As an educator he was neither a vulgar ideologue of the Giroux stripe, nor a hardened traditionalist of the Entwistle-Hirsch variety. On the contrary, he was a genuine educator with a clear and practical vision of education as a high pursuit, the best of it reserved for the select and deserving minority who were to be the “great scholars” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 37) on which civilization is carried to fruition now and forever, as in the days of Athenian brilliance and Roman high culture.

Prisoner of Thought World: E. D. Hirsch

A study in retrieval would be incomplete without a final word on Hirsch and the iconic Gramsci. One measure of the distance between the two is Gramsci’s aim in the creative school to produce those scholars of outstanding accomplishment and culture necessary to every civilization (Gramsci, 1971, p. 37) in contrast to the fundamentally remedial thrust of the tradition Hirsch appeals to, holds up as a standard, and within which he operates. The word for the National Commission on Excellence in Education is: “remedial.” There it is and in one word you have said it all. Ransack the Hirsch oeuvre (notably *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them*, 1996) and that of his associates and you will not find any coherent program for professional training and education designed to elevate the culture and produce the “great scholars” to whom Gramsci looked.

The blind spot at the center of Hirsch's vision of reform is his inability to appreciate the subject side in the subject-object polarity and dialectic. Yet this is precisely one of the fundamental issues in epistemology according to mainstream research, for example as weightily expounded by James Brown in the Cromwell Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh (1953) and published as *Subject and Object in Modern Theology, A Study of Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Martin Buber, and Heidigger* (1962).

Close attention to the subject pole is the distinguishing feature defining the role of the teacher in the creative school and the sizzle of insight learning in the children to be the great scholars of the future. In his fixation on the object pole, so characteristic of all his associates, he is unable to distinguish the difference between himself and Bruner, quite ignoring the great contribution Bruner and associates have made to the tradition of discovery teaching. Were it not for Hirsch's disastrous misunderstandings of the stakes in the culture war, he would not have assimilated Freire to progressive education or Kozol to liberal reform. Nor would he have mistaken his authorities, the ordinary scientists who write the ordinary books and articles in what has come to be the official literature, for the last word in "solid mainstream research." Since he has been fishing in the wrong pond, all he ever catches are the small fry of psychological research, cognitive science, and the sprightly Rita Kramer.

In another, bigger and better pond, Hirsch might have found a rich fascinating literature by mathematicians and scientists of all kinds and in various fields describing the nature and structure of insight. The subject has been analyzed from the iconic case of Archimedes to the studies of Poincare, Kerkule, Max Planck, Cannon, Graham Wallis, and many others writing on insight in mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc. I plan to submit the counter-evidence in a small book titled *The Timeless Way of Teaching Handbook for Teachers and Students*. From Leibniz on down, these are among the makers of the modern world. Yet Hirsch overlooks the entire tradition in favor of the ordinary writings

of “academic scribblers.” Once again, there are two traditions of “mainstream research” or “solid mainstream research” and one of them is more solid than the other, if I may adapt Orwell’s phrase.

Hirsch’s misunderstandings are as the sands of the sea. Full treatment of them would inevitably run to encyclopedic proportions. Instead, I propose a highly condensed form stating his principle constructions or misconstructions with a brief rebuttal. Analyzing a key figure on the opposing side, Hirsch suggests (by context) that in *Savage Inequalities* (1991) Jonathan Kozol favors the equal funding of public schools. Hirsch, who is normally very free with documentation, offers none at this point. Nor could he, for there is none to be had. Hirsch phrases the case in terms of “equity” and equitable funding along, say, the lines established by the Serrano decisions (1971 and 1976) and various cases mentioned in the book. This is the liberal case in school reform.

However, Kozol is not a liberal. He is an anti-liberal, a socialist of Marxian flavor, who derides the liberal view as “simple minded and irrelevant.” Kozol will have nothing to do with merely equal funding. Quite the contrary, “equity” in Kozol’s sense means a precise reversal of the steep lines of imbalance between, e.g., the Piedmont schools and those of Oakland. Equality will not do it for these children, Kozol argues, “because their needs are greater” (Kozol, 1991, p. 204). Hirsch goes on to misconstrue Kozol’s position in the politics of the culture class. He represents Kozol as an educational progressive, presumably in the romantic tradition of Kilpatrich and Colonel Parker, which flowered most colorfully in the sixties “free school” movement; in fact, Kozol is an acute critic of the romantic side of progressive education as any reader of *Free Schools* (1972) can see. Kozol says: “By their funding shall ye know them,” and there is nothing romantic about that.

Hirsch contrasts the higher rank of American colleges and universities with the low estate of our schools. The higher institutions place great value on the depth, breadth, and accuracy of knowledge while the schools disparage this in accordance with the “banking theory” famously linked to the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

In fact there is nothing in “banking theory” to warrant a word of this. Banking theory is, strictly speaking, a cognitional theory emphasizing the student as the subject in the most active mode of thought and attention and critical reflection in the interplay of the subject-object relation. Anyone who reads Friere’s small article “The Act of Study” can see that he voices no opposition to content per se. His opposition is to the narrative or third person style of the lecture by contrast to the “I-Thou” mode of critical conversation or *dialogue*—Friere’s key concept. This is also evident in the first few pages of the second chapter of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) where Freire contrasts the two traditions sharply as “teacher cognitive” versus “student cognitive” QED. The real problem with “banking theory” in Freire’s hands is the Marxist twist he gives it at the end. The genesis of this twist is readily apparent in the essays from the early Lukacs to the later Bloch (as in the former’s studies of 1918 and 1923 and the latter’s commentaries on the subject-object relation in Hegel).¹²⁾

In a startling passage Hirsch clothes himself in the authority of Jefferson. Of course Jefferson was in favor of the highest level of education, and this needed to be content based, rooted in the subject matter of history, literature, and the sciences of the time. However, his *Bill on the Diffusion of Education* was predicated on the value of rural life with a small landed aristocracy. Accordingly, Jefferson crafted one of the most selective systems in the annals of American education. “By these means,” said Thomas Jefferson, “twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually.” The contrast with Hirsch and the promotion of mass culture could hardly be more striking. Hirsch has confused “public education” with “mass education,” the “public” with the “mass”: and with this the tension between democracy and education is lost.

Though he recognized the twofold nature of Jefferson’s idea of education as based on talent and virtue, Hirsch focuses entirely on knowledge. Virtue, which is the moral dimension of the student as subject, has disappeared and with it the distinction between education (or

culture) and training (or skills “knowledge,” “core knowledge,” and the like). Hirsch has given us a remedial program in training. Fair enough. But why mislabel this, calling it “education” and linking it to the name of Jefferson?

Hirsch makes favorable reference to Bruner, but fails to recognize the significance of the work associated with his name. This oversight is a clue to his method. Hirsch sees everything as falling into one or another of two camps: factual or content rich traditional education versus “romantic” or anti-content progressive education. The politics of this method makes for the strangest of bedfellows. Bruner would appear to be lumped with the first, along with Gramsci, whereas Kozol and Freire, along with discovery teaching, are relegated to the second.

As the beau ideal of traditional education Hirsch directs our eyes to “Polished Stones,” a videotape of Japanese style teaching in mathematics edited by Professor Harold Stevenson and available from the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Merely to meet him point for point, I invite your attention to a homemade product, the very American “Challenge in the Classroom,” a videotape available on my website (www.instituteforactivelearning.org) of Professor R. L. Moore teaching a class in mathematics via “the Moore Method,” an early form of discovery teaching in mathematics. It is described in a very readable article by Paul Halmos, himself a distinguished mathematician and teacher in *Selecta: Expository Writings* (1983) now made available on my website.

As the most polished of his polished stones, Hirsch holds up a textbook for our admiration. This is an American product and not a Japanese one, homemade and Anglo-Saxon to the bone, the Protestant ethic made flesh. Its author is John Saxon, and his credentials are formidable. As an Air Force pilot he flew fifty-five missions in Korea. Turning to teaching, he was aghast at the mathematical illiteracy of his students and wrote a textbook to provide them with a no-nonsense, content-rich, back-to-basics foundation. An immediate success, it has been adopted by hundreds of schools, and is popular with home schoolers. Sequels were written,

and Mr. Saxon went on to become a multimillionaire.

Place this precious stone beside a book called *Discovery in Mathematics* by Robert B. Davis (1964) or its companion volume *Explorations in Mathematics* (1967). While much of this is designed for a more elementary level, which of the two is superior as an orientation and approach to really fine mathematics education?¹³

To brief off his case Hirsch has consistently confused two traditions which have next to nothing in common: A) The “aristocratic” or elite tradition of Jefferson with B) the mass tradition of “core knowledge” and the basics buffs; A) Gramsci and the socialist tradition beginning with the two codes Morelley’s *Code de la Nature* (1755), and Dezamy’s *Code de la Communauté* (1842) and continuing with the early Lukacs and Revai down to Freire and “banking theory” with B) Bagley, Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, and Charles Sykes, i.e., the architects of hegemony; A) The tradition from Moore and Halmos, Bruner and Shulman, Davis, Hawkins, Stebbins and discovery teaching, strictly speaking, with B) the vagaries of progressive education, European romanticism, James Hurd, Kilpatrick, Colonel Parker, and the rest. Worst of all, he has confused a brilliant tradition, which centers on the student as subject with a movement in which the student is always and everywhere the object of instruction and propaganda dressed up as history, as classically revealed by Frances Fitzgerald in *America Revised* (1979).

Hirsch is a gifted polemicist and his effect is overwhelming. If Hirsch has things right side up I have things upside down. Either the case for traditional education, the key function of rote learning and drill, the narrative style of the lecture, the survey style of the textbook, the teacher as oracle, the imperative for a national curriculum policed by a politburo of enlightened traditional educators, etc., has been brought off with success, and the enemy, prominently including “discovery teaching” put to rout, or our flag is still flying, despite this recent advance in offensive artillery.

Gramsci as icon is the ideal entry point into the thought world of E. D. Hirsch. If Gramsci is not as I have represented him he is merely

a curiosity in the museum of historical antiquities, a dull and unoriginal traditionalist hawking a baggage of facts or, worse yet, a proto-vulgarian ideologue out of business since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But if he is as I represent him in his essay “On Education” and more particularly, on the creative school, then a wholly different universe of discourse opens up in the debate on education and the nature, perfection, and destiny of America as civilization. And the analysis of Hirsch and his various misconceptions can point the way to the correct solution.

The Solution

Dewey and Russell’s thoughts were presented in a paper read at a symposium on education in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In it, Professor William Hare has carefully summarized their contributions to the “philosophy of education” as the professoriate is pleased to call it. However, suppose that these are not regarded as matters of philosophy, consigned to some Platonic limbo and there to be debated forever. Suppose instead, that they are regarded as cognitional activities that I, as student, perform when I am thinking. Why then, the question is: How must I, as teacher, teach so as to produce and develop these cognitional activities? How must I do this in the case of say, subtraction, exponentiation, functions and function machines, summation, imaginary and complex numbers, graphing on the complex plane, and so forth? Or, how should I do this with the equality clause of the Declaration of Independence, the free speech clause of the First Amendment, the Gettysburg Address, and so on? It is a question of *techne*, not of ideology. It follows that teaching of this form is always value neutral. It cannot have any purely ideological axe to grind for that is the very nature of a *techne*.

This is a form of teaching I developed as a young faculty member at the University of California, Berkeley. This is also the mode of instruction developed in “the discovery school” as I here call it, which

I founded and directed for twenty years in Berkeley. Or, yet, again, this is the method and style of teaching I am presenting on my website for you to see and judge for yourself. “Dynamic conformism” apart, I contend that it is at all points identical with the fundamental elements in the vision of education which inspired Antonio Gramsci in the pain-wracked solitude of his prison cell. Nor do I say this because I have the slightest desire to benefit by association with the name and legend of Gramsci. Not only is it a fact that I do not share his political outlook, but it is also a fact that discovery or Socratic teaching has, as a practical enterprise, soared far beyond anything he could have imagined. But on the crucial point we are as one, the creative school and the discovery program are identical. And we are ready to bring it out from the prison walls to the capital cities of the New World.

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- 1) The Exception and the Rule: The case of Cuba might yet turn out to be a perhaps arguable but certainly very interesting exception to the general rule notary covering the Soviet Union and its East European satellites and China.
 - 2) It is precisely this point on which the issue was joined by John Dewey in “The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James” (1940). Dewey’s more general analysis in cognitional theory is presented in his earlier book, *How We Think* (1910).
 - 3) It suffices to mention the names of Toulmin, Peters, Hare, and Searle to convey the point. R. S. Peters (1966) illustrated the approach to education and the debate provoked by Searle’s article on the is/ought question exemplifies the general style.
 - 4) Bertrand Russell (1959, pp.100-101) presents an on-the-spot account of the transition from Brentano and the act-content-object analysis of sensation to the abstraction favored by the propositional function. In this abstraction, as in Wittgenstein, the “subject” is repudiated as outdated. “There is no such thing as the soul, the subject, etc., as is conceived in contemporary superficial psychology.” *Tractatus* 5.5, as quoted in Russell (1959, p.87).
 - 5) Voegelin concludes the analysis of Helvitius in connection with Bentham and modern utilitarianism with these words: “The process of general education for the purpose of forming the useful members of society while neglecting or even deliberately destroying the life of the soul is accepted as an institution of our modern society so fully that awareness of the demonism of such interference for the life of the soul on a social mass scale and of the inevitably following destruction of the spiritual substance of society

is practically dead.” (Voegelin, 1975, p. 70)

- 6) All pagination here as given in parentheses refers to the precise pages in Gramsci's essay "On Education."
- 7) The significance and capital importance of Rousseau in the culture clash was brought to center stage first in Italy and then in the United States. In Italy, Galvano della Volpe, writing from the left, analyzed the relationship between Rousseau and Marx in his *Rousseau e Marce Altri Saggi di Critica Materialistica*, Editori Reuniti (1964), subsequently available in English as *Rousseau and Marx* (1978). A year later, Allan Bloom published his translation of the *Emile* with its provocative introduction written from the standpoint of the Straussian right. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* (1979), translated with an introduction by Allan Bloom.
- 8) For an account by a prominent political scientist, privileged to have interviewed Mussolini directly for the preparation of his study, see Herman Finer *Mussolini's Italy* (1965), pages on 461, 468, 471-472, 475 and passion. The original edition was published in 1935 by Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY.
- 9) "... with a solid homogenous moral and social conscience."
- 10) The educational authority Jacques Barzun wrote of the university: "must always remember that the new truth almost always sounds crazy and crazier in proportion to its greatness. It would be idiocy to keep recounting the stories of Copernicus, Galileo, and forget that the innovator was seen as hopelessly wrong and perverse as these men seemed. The cost of this freedom might be a good deal of crackpot error but nothing good goes unpaid for." (Brazun, 1954, pp. 163-164)
- 11) Georg von Lukacs. "Die Subjekt-Objekt-Beziehung in der Asthetik," (1918) and his legendary *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923).
- 12) See Ernst Bloch, *Subjekt-Objekt Erlauterungen Zu Hegel*, (1962).
- 13) If the workbook style of the layout makes comparison difficult, then try Jacobs H.'s book of *Mathematics: A Human Endeavor* (1994).

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Biographical Note

Oscar Pemantle is the director of Institute for Active Learning in California, U.S. He had studied Political Science and taught at U.C. Berkeley. He founded and directed the once prestigious Black Pine Circle School, organized a statewide conference of teachers and administrators in Lincoln, Nebraska with Governor Bob Kerrey, and published numerous, well-received articles on education.
oscar.pemantle@gmail.com

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